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To The Mountain (Part 4)

Written by [Bladedancer \(/index.php/read/author/74-bladedancer\)](/index.php/read/author/74-bladedancer)

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To The Mountain

Part 4

By Heather O'Malley

assisted by the rest of the Whatley Gang

Whatley Academy Universe



The Tao doesn't take sides; it gives birth to both good and evil. The Master doesn't take sides; she welcomes both saints and sinners. - Tao Te Ching, Chapter 5

Tuesday, 28 November 2006

Chou knew who the boy was and wasn't sure why he had slid in front of her, making her stop. The hallway was filled with kids heading to class and now she was stopped, the river of students flowing around her. She didn't know his name but knew he was a member of the Dragons, one of the two Martial Arts Glee Clubs. The Dragons had not really tried to do anything

positive or negative with her yet, so what had changed now?



hoped that this wasn't some sort of attempt at recruiting her. They were the home group of that asshat Thunderdrake, who kept attacking her to try and wrest Destiny's Wave from her. Ayla had come through with that information as the Kiai attack seemed pretty indicative of him. At this point Chou would just give him the sword and let him deal with being a girl. But the Demon Lord of Fiery Immersion had the one means for her to break the link to the sword, short of death. She wasn't sure if she was ready for that.

Chou waited, her body ready to absorb any attack and to begin the beat down on this guy. It would be quick and ugly, since she was bone tired. She just wanted to get through the day and to try and lie down since she hadn't been able to really sleep well in days and her nightmares were graphic and disturbing. She didn't need this.

The boy was taller than her and quite solid. She did not relish fighting him. He looked familiar. She remembered him from one of her classes but couldn't recall the name. His hair was cropped short as if he were a Tibetan Buddhist Monk. He had a wooden, sand colored mala wrapped around his left wrist. His wrists also seemed to have a lightning bolt shape birthmark on the inside and he was smiling at her gently. His chi felt centered and serene, like a deep mountain pool, which was markedly different from other peoples around the school and something about it called to her.

The boy looked to be a bit nervous though, which didn't fit with being ready to fight, but Chou couldn't figure out any other reason to stop her. "Uhm...Hi Chou. I'm Dorjee Nawang, but most people call me either David or Chain Lightning. I know it's a dumb name and all but...well...anyway I was wondering, you know, if it's okay with you, if you and I might...you know...go get something to eat together?"

Chou stood there like she had been poleaxed. A guy had asked her out? A Guy had asked Her out? But she was a guy, well sort of, right? Her heart began to race, her breathing tightened. She started scanning the room like a scared rabbit. What? Why? "I...I uh...got to go."

Chain Lightning just stood there smiling gently as Chou raced off towards the bathroom. Her thoughts were a jumble. Why would a guy want to go out with her? She was nothing special. There were so many beautiful women out there, why would they want to bother with a false girl like her? Was there something wrong with Dorjee?

She managed to avoid vomiting this time. After splashing cold water on her face, she cautiously headed off for classes, trying to make sure she didn't bump into Dorjee. The whole idea of dating a guy churned her stomach. She wasn't gay, or was that straight. The whole mixed up body thing made her insane. She never knew what really described her.

She headed off to lunch after class a bit distracted. So many things were running around her mind that it was a wonder that she was still moving. She just wanted to lie down somewhere and think or sleep, as sleep would be welcome. She wasn't paying attention as her thoughts roamed and she ran right into Aries.

She looked up shocked and stuttered out an apology to the Upperclassman. Aries looked ready to pound her when he glanced over at another table. He could see that the Dragon's and the Beta's were both ready to get involved. He just snorted and said, "Stupid bitch, watch where you're going. A little kid like you could end up hurt that way."

Chou shook as she headed into the lunch line. She didn't join into the usual chatter at the table and didn't even say anything when Toni offered to rearrange Aries face for her. She was too distracted to join in on the conversation and the other girls looked at each other concerned. This was even worse than the usual taciturn Chou.



Chou relaxed more into her stance and tried to let everything drift away. Toni stood before her doing the same thing, both of their energies deepening. Her friend grinned at her, clearly relishing the idea of fighting with her. The two were to spar again, for the education of the class. Chou breathed deep, waiting for the word to begin.

Once Ito uttered it the two girls exploded into action. The other students sat back and did their best to follow the blur of movement and the power of their technique. Watching the two girls fight was one of the pleasures of the class as both were obviously skilled in their individual styles.

At first they were in kicking range, trading hits and blocking with their shins. Several students grimaced at the impact sounds the two made. Then they closed to arm range, trading various punches and knee strikes. The speed with which they moved made other students less confident about their sparring against either of them. Then they moved to grapple range, throwing each other to the ground or the other threw themselves over faster.

Chou got clocked in the face with an elbow and she got angry. Toni noticed the change in attack style and went more on the defensive, trying to figure out what was going on. Toni could feel most of the strikes a moment before they were to impact, making it a bit harder for her to defend herself. Chou had never fought this all out before. This wasn't sparing, this was fighting.

Toni took a couple of body shots and one shot to the face before Ito stopped it. "Enough! Back to your places."



froze and went back to their starting lines. Both Toni and Chou looked to be sporting black eyes and it was clear that the punches hadn't been pulled as they both breathed heavier. Toni looked like she had gotten the better end of the bargain, with the most damage coming from the last three hits.

Tolman strode up to Chou. "What were you doing? This is a sparing match and not a street brawl."

Chou just glowered at Toni. Her eye was already swelling some. Toni looked more confused than anything else.

"Look at me when I am talking to you. You need to get your head on right. Hit the showers."

Chou stormed to the locker room and took a quick shower, simply rinsing the sweat from her body. She was out of the building before class ended. She stomped back to the dorms and threw her stuff on the desk. Toni was so much better than her, so how come the girl hit her. It had to have been on purpose.

But Toni wasn't like that, she wouldn't do that. Was it her and not Toni? Was she the problem and not her favorite sparing partner?



"Okay, so today we are going to talk about Ley Lines and how they can be used in hunting Ghosts." Chou rolled her eyes, did she really have to be here for this? "As we all know, Ley Lines are everywhere and they are like...rivers of power moving through the earth."

Chou didn't even remember why she was doing this. These guys were losers. If this really was the group that had gone after Sara than it was a complete and utter fluke. She understood now why several of the kids in this group wore Velcro shoes.

She knew about the dragon lines that ran through the earth, directing the Earth's Chi. These idiots, with their talk of Ghosts and Demons, would probably wet themselves if they saw a real monster. She rubbed the bridge of her nose. Her day had sucked and she really didn't want to have to put up with things.

Sara had been attacked and Chou had volunteered to do this. She had decided to help find those who had attacked Sara and make them pay for the carnage over Halloween. Sara was tied to life and the Tao wanted to preserve her. Sara was hers to truly protect, to ward off true foes that might endanger the demonic princess. Chou would guard her at any cost but if this was her only lead to who attacked her then maybe she needed to broaden her search.

She had no idea where or who. This was all she had and supposedly patience would get her inside. But what could be inside the aptly named Goobers? A nice hollow space?

She sighed and continued to try and pretend to care about the information. Maybe she would actually be let into a more secret group than this collection of losers. Sarah wasn't here and she noticed that Eko-tech wasn't either. Come to think of it, as she scanned the room, there were a couple of others missing who had been there earlier when this all started. Was this group really as stupid as she had thought or were they using these people as some sort of cover?



Chou had raced to the bathroom in the dorms and barely made it in time. The Cajun food she had gotten for dinner burned on its way back up. She retched heavily, her throat burning from the acid. After the dry heaves settled Chou rose shakily to her feet. She went to the sink and splashed cold water onto her face. It did nothing to change the pale skin or the circles under her eyes.

She returned to the Common Room of the dorm and headed back to where the other girls were sitting and studying. They weren't studying but were all looking at her. She sat back down and the whispering began.

"Are you alright?" asked Toni.

"I'm fine." mumbled Chou.

"No you're not." countered Nikki. "You haven't really been able to keep anything down in days. And Ayla said that you were having a lot of nightmares. Chou, what is going on?"

"I'll be okay. I just don't feel my best right now. I'll be fine."

The other girls looked at each other, concern plain on their faces. Toni tried again, since Chou seemed to be trying to push them away. It was all that she could think of to do in this case. "You can talk to us Chou, we're your friends. If anything is bothering you, we will listen and do what we can to help."

The others murmured their assent to that statement. Chou was tempted to tell them, but maybe she shouldn't load them

down with her worries? Maybe they had their own problems that they were dealing with? Maybe they weren't really interested with her problems.

"I know. There just isn't anything to talk about." Chou nodded and shrugged.

She returned to her studying. The tension didn't fade and the uncomfortable sense of the others concerns remained until Chou got up and headed off to bed. She just didn't want to talk about things, was that a crime? Maybe she should go to bed early. She was so tired. Maybe she would actually sleep the night.

Everyone surrounded her and she couldn't seem to get up off of the chair. It was like she was being held there by some invisible force. She struggled but she couldn't move.

Toni looked down at her. "You disgust me. Here you are a beautiful woman and you don't care, don't revel in all that fun. You are just a whiney little brat. Who needs you?"

With that, the girl walked away from Chou, into the darkness. As Toni vanished she felt something strain and snap, and she felt cut off somehow.

Hank stepped forward. "You know Chou, you just don't get it do you? We were your friends, but looks like you just didn't care."

He faded into the darkness and Chou recoiled slightly from the line breaking. She tried to speak but found the she couldn't.

Tenno just walked up and spat on her before she walked off into the dark. Jade followed suit, doing everything her sempai did. Ayla stood in front of her and frowned. "Maybe it would have been a good thing just to have crushed you."

Chou was crying and struggling to get out. Nikki slapped her and said, "I thought we were friends. I guess you were lying about that as well."

On and on the line moved, of people she knew and cared for telling her off and vanishing into the darkness. Last was Molly. She stood before Chou, frowning. "He told me to give you this."

Chou began screaming as Molly brought out a knife and began to cut open her chest. Blood splashed all over Chou, soaking her face. The wet heaviness of the heart, that was still pumping, nestled in her lap, up in her crotch. Chou screamed.

Wednesday, 29 November, 2006 sunny cold

Chou awoke shaking and stared at the ceiling. She felt exhausted and in no mood to do anything except sleep some more. The Tao would surely understand if she didn't practice today, if she just curled up in bed and stayed there. She was exhausted mentally and physically, drained utterly. Waking up more tired than when she laid down was getting to be quite common.

She dragged herself through Tai Chi and breakfast, trying to focus on what she was doing, but images from her dreams kept drifting through her mind. They hovered there, drifting whenever she managed to focus on something for more than a minute, shaking her concentration.

Class seemed to be difficult as well. She tried to take notes, to be a good student but she couldn't focus. Her head felt muffled, like it was wrapped in cotton candy. She shook her head, trying to clear it. The teacher at the front of the classroom was droning on and on and she just didn't care. Why was this information important? It's not like she would be alive to use it. She laid her head down on her books, just trying to wait it out.

Class ended and she walked down the hall. She headed towards the Library, hoping to catch Molly there, since her girlfriend liked hanging out around all the books. She was planning on apologizing to Molly about everything. She hadn't been feeling well and she wanted to make things right.

The lights were off in the Library, which was slightly odd. Chou moved cautiously through the stacks, hoping to find Molly in their quiet corner. She made it there and saw Molly sitting in a chair, resting, and her head on one of the arms. Chou was filled with love for her.

Chou shook her and there was no response. She was concerned and so she shook her again. "Molly?"

The force of the shake caused Molly's limp and lifeless body to flop back onto the chair, her eyes white with death. Chou's heart started beating rapidly, bile rose up her throat. She screamed for help. As she turned, she spotted a message on the end of one of the stacks. "All your friends shall pay, Alex."

Chou screamed.



Chou jumped upright from her desk, heart racing, scanning the room in a panic. Everyone in class was looking at her, no body moving. The fear in Chou's eyes was clear to them all.

The teacher spoke up. "Miss Lee, are you alright?"

"I...uh...I...no. Can I go to the Nurse?" replied Chou, who began to shake uncontrollably.

The teacher nodded. She stood and collapsed back down into her chair. The teacher then said. "Mr. Nawang, could you escort her to the Nurse's office?"

Dorjee stood and moved to help Chou stand. Chou looked up at him with some apprehension. He smiled at her, with that same soft smile as before. He reached out a hand for her to take. "Let's go. Lean on me for support Chou."

Chou swallowed and nodded. Dorjee held her hands and let Chou lever herself up from him. He held her elbow to support her and they were heading out on their way.

Halfway there, as Chou was walking on her own, just a bit shaky, Dorjee asked, "So, Chou, you never answered my question, about eating?"

Bile rose in Chou's throat at the thought of food. "Ugh...don't talk about food."

Dorjee nodded his head. "Ok. How about any other generally approved way of trying to spend time with you?"

Chou, distracted by her thoughts, was thinking about finding Molly dead, so she absently replied, "Sure, fine."

"Then I will take you out this Saturday. I can pick you up at seven from your hall." Dorjee was polite and his voice was so calm that Chou barely registered what he was saying.

They got to the Nurses office and Dorjee left her there, bowing as he said good-bye. After a brief discussion the Nurse sent Chou to Dr. Bellows. Chou grumbled as she made her way over to her counselor's office. What Dorjee had said also registered. She began to curse under her breath. How did she get into these things?

There was no line at all so she was allowed in quickly. This was no comfort at all. She really didn't want to do this. She sat in her chair and pulled up her legs and crossed her arms.

Dr. Bellows started in on her quickly. "So, I have noticed that you have been avoiding these sessions."

"Yeah. I didn't think they were helping me. I still had the same problems and they weren't getting better."

"Alright, so you had a nightmare in class?"

"Yeah." Chou really wanted to be anywhere but there.

"Care to share what it was?" inquired Dr. Bellows.

Chou thought about what she had seen in her dream and felt her gorge rise up in her throat. She swallowed hard to make sure she didn't vomit. She had been doing a lot of that lately. "I'd rather not."

"How about your sleep? I've heard that you haven't been sleeping well."

"I haven't. I've been having a lot of Nightmares lately."

"And are you willing to talk about them?"

The memory of the blood and ghastly images, that still haunted her, rose up in her mind. She could almost taste the metallic sweetness of it. "Uhm...no."

Dr. Bellows rubbed the bridge on his nose in apparent frustration. "I can't help you Chou unless you let me in. I am not your enemy and I can help you deal with things. I told you before that I could help you be happy and I meant it. Please, if you want any help just say so."

Chou thought things through and realized that maybe Dr. Bellows couldn't really follow through with that. He didn't know what she was going through and like he could actually relate with what had happened to her. He had powers as well, so like he could truly understand what she had to deal with.

Dr. Bellows looked at the quiet girl who was obviously turning inwards sadly. He wished he could do something, but she wasn't a danger to herself or others...yet. He made a few notes in his records and called over to try and talk with the changeling girl's Mentor.

"What the fuck do you think your doing!?" yelled Thunderdrake.



ned and just looked at Colin for a moment. He stood there calmly in the Dragon's private dojo in one of the basement levels and did not look worried. "I am merely talking to a girl I like. Is that a crime?"

"She has the sword I have searched for. You're getting in my way." Thunderdrake got right up into Chain Lightning's face. The boy was clenching and unclenching his fists.

The Tibetan simply smiled at him. "You have not been able to wrest the sword from her for months. Perhaps you need to give up, Colin."

"My Name Is Thunderdrake!" bellowed the well built white boy.

"Enough!" Both turned and bowed as Zhong Lau entered the room. "Thunderdrake, Chain Lightning is right, you have had months and have attacked her several times and have failed. This is over."

"But I have a plan..."

"It is over." growled Zhong Lau. "You have had your chance. It is done. Besides, her skill is great and we should extend membership to her rather than alienate her."

Dorjee nodded as did the other members of the group. If it hadn't been for the obsession over the sword that would have happened already. Colin kept arguing. "But that's not fair."

Zhong Lau turned to face Thunderdrake slowly. He looked the boy up and down, his eyes flat and emotionless. "Do you wish to challenge me, Thunderdrake?"

Colin paled at the question and stumbled back, stuttering his response as he bowed. "N...N...No, my Lord."

"Then it is done. If Chain Lightning wishes to see Bladedancer, that is his concern and not ours. She is a strong martial artist and would be of great benefit to our ranks. We will invite her to join us and you will be the one to invite her, Colin."



The Library was quiet and calm. The lights were on which helped a great deal. She needed the peace after everything. Her dreams were haunting her waking world now and that was taking a toll on her. She was still a bit skittish moving through the stacks as she kept expecting to find bloody letters everywhere. She was hoping for some peace so she could relax.

She got to the quiet corner and went in, feeling the air tingle from the power of the spell. Chou finally saw Molly, sitting in a chair, resting, and her head on one of the arms. Chou's head spun as she grew lightheaded and she dropped to her knees. The noise alerted Molly who looked up at her in surprise. "Oh...you scared me."

Chou was crying when she looked up and saw Molly looking down at her. She shook in shock and had to be helped up into one of the chairs. Molly looked at her carefully, worriedly. "Chou, sweetie, are you all right? I mean you said I shouldn't bother you, but you look terrible."

Chou shook her head. She was still seeing Molly lying there on the chair, her eyes turned white, lifeless. "I'm fine. I'm fine."

"No you're not. Chou you look terrible. Haven't you been sleeping? And Toni told me that you haven't been able to keep anything down. You need to go in and talk to someone. Maybe they can help."

Chou snapped her head up angrily. Hadn't Molly heard what Chou said? "Damn it Molly. I am fine. Sure I have had some trouble sleeping and eating but that happens. I'm just tired and a little cranky, that's all. So back off."

Molly slunk back a bit but then she visibly summoned her resolve and continued. "Chou, I'm worried about you. You haven't really talked to me since I came back from thanksgiving. What's wrong? I'm your girlfriend, right?"

Chou snorted in derision. "Sure, I'm your girlfriend. I'm more like something you're ashamed of. You still haven't told your parents. What am I some sort of leper?"

Molly was crying now. "I told you, things just weren't right. There wasn't a good time to talk to them."

"There's never a good time to talk to them. I'm just some stupid friend of yours. It's not like I mean anything to you!" Chou was yelling now, coming to her feet.

"But I love you." protested Molly.

"Sure. That's why we are hidden here in this fucking corner of the fucking library. I'm just some dirty little secret of yours." spat Chou.

Molly was sobbing now, her face red and stained with tears. "How could you say that to me? I thought we had something

special?"



ed her eyes and took in a deep breath. Her voice was back to regular volume when she said, "Yeah...so special that your parents know all about it."

Molly turned and ran out of the corner, crying as she ran. Chou watched her angrily and then when Molly turned away through the stacks and out of sight the reality of what she had said fell down on her. Chou dropped down to her knees in front of the chair where Molly had been sitting, weeping and stroking the place where Molly had laid her head.



Chou was really not feeling well. She was tired and her sleep hadn't been good in a few weeks. She also knew she was coming up on another period and that didn't help matters any either. The fight with Molly had drained her and she just wanted to crawl into bed and die. She was ignoring things in the foyer, friendly hellos and the like and just wanted to make it up the stairs. That just didn't really seem to be in the plans.

"Well if it isn't one of the semi-sisters. Where you going now, freak?" Sharisha was coming down the stairs and seemed determined to cause more trouble today than normal. Chou really wasn't in the mood to deal with the girl. To much had happened today.

"I don't have time to play your games today, Sharisha. Let me pass." Chou simply wanted to move past and shifted to the side, out of the other girl's way.

Sharisha followed, blocking the path, moving up into Chou's face. "I don't think so. I am tired of you fake girls prancing around here, invading our women only spaces. Why don't you just leave and go to Hawthorne where your kind belongs?"

Chou's head snapped up as if she had been slapped. Suddenly it felt like she had been plunged into icy water and her body filled with the cold. Her voice was emotionless and precise as she asked. "What was that?"

"You heard me. You freaks need to get locked up with the other freaks, to keep your taint from rubbing off and infecting any of us." Sharisha smiled as she noted that her words were finally having an effect on Chou. Maybe the Asian girl wasn't as impervious as she acted? "Too bad you couldn't simply die and make things even better."

Chou's vision blurred to red and her hand snapped out, casually. Sharisha was flung across the room by the force of the backhanded blow. The girl slid down the wall as Chou slid towards her dangerously, as if gliding on silk. The attack she made was slow and focused and full of force.

Sharisha barely dodged to the side and Chou's fist shattered a section of the wall. Yells began to fill the room as everyone came out of their shock, pieces of the masonry hitting a few people. Chou's sweeping kick dropped Sharisha and the flat punch that caught her in mid air slammed the African American girl across the room and into the wall again, dislocating the other girl's shoulder. Sharisha cried out in pain and let loose her power. Chou smiled slightly at that, a cold smile that chilled everyone who saw it. She moved towards the moaning girl, ignoring the mental attack, intent on causing her more pain than the girl had ever known. If Sharisha wanted to fuck with Chou, the girl would learn the price. She would hurt Sharisha until that bitch could feel Chou's pain.

Someone grabbed Chou by a shoulder trying to stop her and she moved on, rolling her shoulder out of the grasp and ignoring them, focused only on causing as much damage as possible to Sharisha. She slid up to the girl, despite the resistance, flat slapped her target on her left side, and felt a couple of the ribs break. She didn't push any harder than was necessary to hurt Sharisha. Chou wanted pain, not death. She then backhanded the girl into the corner. The girl spun through the air and hit head first.

Someone else grabbed her other shoulder and upper arm and still she kept moving towards Sharisha. The African-American girl who started this was staring up at Chou from the corner with shock and fear plain on her face. She was utterly paralyzed in fear.

Chou moved towards her with no other intention on her mind than making the arrogant girl rue the day she had bothered Chou. She was going to beat some sense into the girl, however long it took. With a shrug she slid out of the hold and continued towards the girl. Her feral grin made Sharisha wet herself in terror. This was something completely unexpected and beyond what she had ever known. Chou stalked towards her, dragging the two who were trying to hold her in place with her.

Suddenly Toni spun in front of her and slapped Chou a few times until the Asian girl refocused on her. The girl seemed to burn with the force of her chi and something else, this worried Toni. She had never seen Chou with this much energy flowing through her. Toni wasn't sure if it was good for her, if it might lead to burnout, since it was so bright. She had to get through to her friend. "Chou, stop it! Stop it! You're killing her!"

Chou started to move her arm, to shove Toni out of her way, when she noticed Hank was holding onto it, sweating with

exertion. Her brow furrowed in confusion as to why Hank might be there and she moved her other arm, with Hippolyta for tight, the Amazon also sweating. Toni slapped her again, keeping Chou disoriented and off of Sharisha. Mrs. Horton's voice snapped through the room like a gunshot. "What is going on?"

Chou looked over at Mrs. Horton in surprise, then at Toni and then finally at Sharisha, who was bleeding from her nose and lip, lying against the wall moaning in pain. Chou stared at the obviously injured girl for a long moment then she shook and collapsed, held upright by Hank and Hippy. Chou began sobbing uncontrollably as the realization of what she had done and almost done fell upon her. They two bricks lowered her gently to the ground and Chou curled up into the fetal position crying. She never heard the call for security and medical.

When she stopped hysterically crying she was in the medical wing. She looked up and around, a bit disoriented. Once she realized where she looked around, to see if anyone was near. Coming here to see Jade ran through her mind, as did her visits to see Sara. The white of the walls creeped her out a little.

She sat up slowly and got out of the bed. She remembered what she had done to Sharisha and she began to cry again. What was she becoming, some sort of monster? Is this what the Tao wanted, for her to kill everyone?

She walked from the room a little unsteady and ran straight into Security Chief Delarose. She started apologizing immediately but he raised his hand to silence her. "Save it. Do you realize what you have done?" asked Delarose sharply.

Chou flinched a little under the glare. It felt like Delarose could look right through her. "I...I really hurt Sharisha. I didn't mean to. I haven't been sleeping well and I feel off and I just wanted to go to my room and lie down and she wouldn't let me go past, and kept saying things. I snapped and I'm sorry. I didn't mean for that to happen."

"The only reason you aren't in a cell right now under arrest is that a number of people said basically what you did and filled us in on the background between you and the other girl. We also got a call from Dr. Bellows who has told us even more. Even then Principal Carson said we shouldn't severely punish you." Chou cringed under Delarose's stare. "Your Martial Arts skill is dangerous Ms. Lee. You could have killed her, easily. I am sorely tempted to put your name up on the threat board with the other Ultraviolents. Have you wear the nametag, check in with us and everything. But that isn't what's going to happen this time. Let's just say that we'll be keeping an eye on you from now on."

Chou nodded, sure she wouldn't be able to say anything in response to that. Her mouth was dry and she just wanted to hide. Her heart was racing and she could tell she was shaking.

"You are getting two weeks detention, to be spent here in the Medical Wing. You will get to see first hand what kind of damage occurs here. And that includes weekends, where you will spend time in a local ER. I want you to realize what you can do to others and what that sort of damage looks like. Am I clear?" stated Delarose.

"Yes sir." Chou whispered.

"Good. Now your Mentor convinced me to have your Detention start on Saturday. But before you leave here you will have to see what you did to Sharisha and listen to the Doctors tell you what you did to her." With a disgusted look, Delarose turned and stormed out. Chou noted that there was still a Security Officer in the hallway, looking grim and ready to take action against her.

A Nurse spotted Chou and waved her over. She held some medical records in her hand. "Here is what happened to the girl you attacked. You broke three ribs, gave her a mild concussion, dislocated her jaw, and gave her multiple contusions and severe bruising. Thankfully there is no damage to her eyes or throat, though there is bruising there. Let's go see her."

Sharisha had various monitors hooked up to her and her face looked swollen and bruised. The girl looked nothing like she usually did. There was something holding her jaw in place and it looked like she was being given oxygen. Chou wanted to look away, but she knew that they would keep her there until she faced what she had done. Sharisha looked nearly dead as she lay there, apparently unconscious.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. She jumped some and turned to face Becca. Her Mentor's face reflected sadness. "Come on."

Her mentor led Chou out of the Hospital wing and outside. The cold air helped Chou feel more awake and less numb. That wasn't a good thing as she began to cry again, the realization about what she had done to Sharisha. Sure the girl was annoying, but her actions hadn't warranted this.

"Becca, I can't do this. I can't do this. I can't kill someone and I can't hurt anyone. I know what can happen but I can't, I just can't." Chou sniffled through the tears. "Please don't make me do this."

Becca looked at Chou sadly. "I understand. But you are a servant of the Tao and the Tao must be followed."

Chou almost sobbed. "But why...why me? I don't want to hurt anyone. I want to go back to my old life, to lying in my room and of being a hero, not actually be one. I just want to go and hide."

"Chou...Alex...listen to me." At mention of her old name Chou turned and looked right at Becca. "The Tao chose you. You were the one who chose the Sword. You didn't choose the bell or the mala, but the sword. You chose this yourself. This is your life, the life you chose to have."

"But I didn't mean to do this to myself. I didn't want to become this thing. Please, can't I just go back? Let this power pass from me to someone else. Let someone else carry this burden, not me." Chou collapsed against her Mentor. Becca held her, trying to gentle the weeping girl.

The Chessmen were everywhere and the sound of gunfire echoed through the halls. Chou dodged from one corner to the next, trying to get away from them. It was a slaughter.

The students had fled to the safety of the tunnels, those who could not fly. There was so much death that Chou was sloshing through a few inches of blood, stepping over the bullet ridden corpses. She kept trying to move, as she could hear Molly crying up ahead.

She moved through the red sea of bodies, down the corridors. She spotted Molly up ahead, on her knees, crying. Chou called out, "Molly!"

Molly turned and faced her. She smiled broadly and then a burst of chain gun fire tore her to shreds.

"No!!!!!!!"

Chou's vision turned red and she waded into the Chessmen fearlessly, tearing them apart with Destiny's Wave. The various fluids within their bodies splashed all over her as well as blood that had been kicked up. Chou didn't notice, all she wanted was the kill.

Thursday, 30 November, 2006

Chou woke to a cold day, frost on the windows. Today was the day. Today she was going to kill someone who hadn't done anything wrong yet. But the Tao knew of the disturbance and it was up to her to get rid of it. She looked out the window listlessly.

She just stared at the outside world and dreaded heading out there. If she left the room she would be committing herself to the action and the death. She watched Bodacia and Fey go outside and look around. Chou wasn't going to do Tai Chi today. She didn't want to merge with the Tao and feel it urging her on. She didn't want to do this but felt like she really had no choice. She had to kill the guy. It was just something she had to do.

She shrugged and headed into the bathroom. She noticed after she wiped that there was blood present. Chou just sighed and almost cried. Did the world just have it in for her? She grabbed her shower stuff from her room and washed, as she felt dirty with the purpose of today. Today she would kill an innocent man.

The tampon felt like another humiliation as she shoved the wad of cotton up into herself. She felt trapped and alone. No one else seemed to be going through what she was. No one else was so upset over their transformation. No one else seemed to have the burden of needing to kill innocents. No one else seemed to feel the pain and grief she did. She was alone.

She dressed quickly. She wanted to be dressed and gone before Ayla woke up. She wanted to vanish. She pulled on her after school clothes, not even bothering with a uniform today. Chou grabbed the big document tube that she had converted to a sword carrier and slung it across her back. She wasn't sure she needed it, but she would have it.

She rested her hand on the handle gently. How much in her world was going to change after this act?

"Chou, are you okay?" asked Destiny's Wave.

"I guess I am okay enough to do this." Her voice really held no emotion. She had cried everything out. She had no more emotion except for regret.

"Are you ready?"

"Hunph! I'm as ready as anyone can be for something like this." Chou looked around the room as if it would be her last time. She did not expect that she would be coming back from this. How could she?

"Chou, the role of the Handmaiden is one that protects all life by shaping and pruning things along the Tao's movements."

Chou looked over at the sleeping Ayla on the bottom bunk. The half girl was almost tangled in her covers. "I know. But my n't be my friends after this."

"You don't know that." argued Destiny's Wave.

"Yeah...you're right. I don't know that." Chou put the sword into the case and closed it up. Maybe her friends would still care for her after this but she rather doubted it. Killing someone was crossing a line. She might be able to do it in battle but to an innocent?

She extended her Chi and moved under its directions to get out of Poe. She managed to get free of the building without anyone else spotting her. She had an appointment with Dr. Bellows in ten minutes but she didn't care. He could talk to the air for all she was concerned. Like he knew what she was going through.

Skipping school was a difficult choice but she wasn't sure she could handle looking at anyone today, anyone at all. Chou breathed deep and let the Tao guide her away from the class buildings and into the forest. She was heading away from campus and could feel the Tao wrap around her. She faded into the trees and out of sight.

"Uhm...sir?"

"What?" replied Chief Delarose as he walked back from refilling his coffee mug.

"We have a student leaving campus. She is heading into restricted sections of the forest, but she has clearance for that."

"Who is it?"

"From what I can tell it is Chou Lee. Should I send a team to intercept?"

"Yes. We don't need students skipping classes. Time to play truant officer." Delarose sighed. "I'll be in my office. Once they get her bring her to me."

"Yes sir."

Thirty minutes later the Chief was called back. "Chief, the kid disappeared."

"What? Not again. Have you called the tribe to see if they have spotted her?" Delarose got up from his desk and headed out to the main operation area.

"They are checking now."

Eloise hated calls like that from the Whateley Security types. She called Ben.

Her mate lumbered into the room. She smiled at him. She really loved Ben and it showed. "There is a kid skipping classes from Whateley. They want us to try and find her since they lost her near the Grove."

"I'll get the twins on it, and a couple of the other boys. They should be able to find her. Bring her here or back to the school?" asked Ben, trying to clarify what needed to be done.

"Take her back to the school. I just want to stay out of that school's affairs as much as possible."

An hour later Ben came back to Eloise. "you aren't going to believe it but there are no signs of the kid anywhere. It's like she vanished. They found her prints from the school, but after that they just fade away to nothing. Even her scent is gone. Who is this kid?"

"Okay, we were ready...where the hell was the girl?" complained Swoop, one of the newer recruits.

Shadowolf sighed, "First rule of Engagement, things change. I have no idea where she is. No one else knows where she is, so we scrub the mission. We can get her later, utilizing the same battle plan. What's the problem?"

Swoop didn't reply, realizing that their boss was getting irate. Sweetheart gave her dazzling smile on everyone and said, "So we wait. The plan is good and Miss Lee simply failed to cooperate. We can wait until she manages to be where we need her to be. OK?"

Everyone smiled and nodded except Bombshell and Shadowolf. When the others left those three started trying to figure out what had happened to their target.



The woods were quiet as she moved through them. Things seemed preternaturally calm, so unlike how the forest had been. There were no sounds of animals scampering, not even the sound of trees waving in the wind. The world had gone quiet, as if holding its breath, waiting.

She moved with all of her training, leaving nothing to show that the Handmaid had passed. The Tao was flowing through her and she could feel its strength pumping through her like a living current. She could feel that it was leading her on to where she was going to execute someone. She could feel the desire of the Tao, in killing the man, but she wasn't sure of the why. She knew what she had been told but was that right? Why would Becca lie to her?

She walked on. She could feel movement around her, but Chou walked in the safety of the Tao. After an hour or so, Chou reached the spot where she was going to get picked up by the guy. The Tao would ensure it, she could feel that clearly.

Chou felt warm in the cold, the Tao running through her more than ever before. She could feel the flow and feel her place in it and it calmed some of her worries. Some.

Her life was falling apart. Things with Molly had gotten fouled up and so had everything else. And that guy, Dorjee, what was his deal? He seemed so nice and everything but was always smiling. It wasn't normal. And he had hit on her. That kind of creeped her out as did the fact that she liked it, just a little bit. What the hell was going on with her?

And school was a mess. She was behind in a few classes and desperately trying to catch up. She really didn't want to think about her friends. She didn't understand why she had gotten that violent at Toni or that upset with Sara. Nothing she did anymore made any sense. She wasn't even sure why the hell she was out here instead of in classes. What was the point? None of it would bring back her dad.

She wept off and on as the hours tolled away. A handful of cars passed in the whole amount of time she was there. This road was quiet and isolated.

Her clock let her know the time. It was time for her to stand out on the road and kill a man. She looked down at her sword and grabbed the handle. Destiny's Wave spoke into the silence, "Are you ready for this Chou?"

"No, but that doesn't mean I am not going to do it. I can feel the need in the Tao but it is a bit unclear." She looked around thoughtfully. "I figure I leave you here and walk back to you when I am done. You might make him notice."

"Alright. I could be masked you know."

"I know, but I have to do this on my own. And maybe I'll be able to do that summoning thing you were talking about, like I did in my dream."

"Maybe." The sword sounded worried. "That tree over there. That should be a good spot. Good luck and I love you."

Chou started in surprise. "You love me?"

"Of course I do. I love you as your Mentor and as your friend. I am worried about you. There are a lot of differences between you and many of the other Handmaidens and that makes me curious."

"I love you too. You have been good to me and I appreciate that. See you soon." Chou placed the sword against the tree and hustled to the road. Part of the Tao faded and she was suddenly cold and tired, as if all her exertions and time in the cold began to affect her. She wanted to collapse. But still the Tao flowed.

She was shivering when she saw the headlights. She stretched out her arm, thumb raised. The car drove past, slowed down and began to head towards her in reverse. She hustled to meet the car, since a heater would be great right about now.

The window was rolled down on the passenger side. "Hop on in. I can take you in to town."

The man looked tired. That was the first thing Chou thought she had upon seeing him. Other than that he looked normal, just like any other adult she had seen. There was something about his eyes, how the dark circles under his eyes were quite visible. Maybe he hadn't been sleeping?

Chou climbed into the car. The man rolled up the window and turned the heater up. Chou smiled at him thankfully. He waited until she had her seatbelt on before he turned off his hazard lights and drove on.

"So, how'd you end up out here? I didn't see a car broken down."

Thankfully the Tao seemed prepared for things. Chou said, "I got lost and have been wandering for hours. I remember that there was a trail I was following and so I need to get to the trailhead closer to town."

"Wow. You really did get lost. I can get you there. Skipped school to go hiking in the winter?" he asked, smiling.

“Yeah. I just love the look of the forest in winter. You have the trees all bare, leaves scattered every where. It’s nice. And plus, now, that only makes things better.” Chou was amazed at how much the Tao could use her. It was strange when  happened with the MCO officer but now was downright weird.

“I can understand. I like taking my wife and kids hiking in the snow. There are some beautiful spots, when the air crisps enough so you can see forever. Absolutely wonderful. We haven’t done that this year. Maybe we could go correct that?” The man seemed to smile, but there was something behind the smile that made it seem almost wistful. He was not like anything she had expected.

“Kids?” She asked, dreading the answer.

“Two. Both girls. They are so beautiful. Christi is the eldest and she loves writing and telling stories about faeries and elves and such. Claire, she loves to dance. Christi will tell a story and Claire will act it out and dance as often as she can. They’re wonderful.” Chou was so attuned to her target she heard the very faint breathed in sob the man uttered. His eyes were glistening with tears.

She felt the Tao prodding her. She could feel that she had to kill this man. She kept thinking about what he was supposed to do in the future but so much of it didn’t seem to fit. This was the man who was going to kill all of those innocent people? She felt the nudging again and asked, “Hey, did you see what the Lottery has gotten to? It’s huge. I just wish I could buy a ticket. \$200 million would certainly be a nice thing to have.”

He smiled at her. “Well, I got my ticket and signed it right there. I am hoping that I can win. I would love to take that money and go on vacation, someplace nice and warm. Wouldn’t that be great?”

Chou nodded. “Yes it would.”

It was time, time for her to take care of what she had to do. She was struggling to keep from crying as she could barely believe what she was about to do. She had been expecting someone cold, impersonal, a jackass, like Counterpoint or the Don, but instead she got Mr. Rogers. She had to kill this man who was concerned for his family. She swallowed tightly.

He pulled over on the side of the road. This surprised her. She looked outside first and spotted the sign marking the trailhead that led off into the safe parts of the massive forest. She looked back at him. His smile didn’t seem to waver. “Well, here you are. I hope you can get somewhere warm really quick. It is chilly out there.”

“Thank you, sir. I really appreciate this. My name’s Chou Lee.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Miss Lee. My name is Andy McWilliams. You take care.” Chou leaned in and hugged the man. He was surprised for a moment and then hugged her back.

When he did, Chou struck, following the current of the Tao that had become her. One hand lifted up in the middle, almost pulling off his back. She lowered it quickly, in a soft strike. Her Chi blasted into the man, striking him in the heart. He would be dead soon, as no one survived the Death Strike. The massive wave of Yin energy rolled through the man and back into Chou. Even though his death was delayed slightly, it was done.

She sat back and opened the door. “Good-bye Mr. McWilliams. Thank you for the ride.”

He waved at her, “You’re welcome. Take care.”

The door closed and he drove away.

Chou stood there, waiting, knowing that something should let her know what had happened. Her Dim Mak should have his whole body shut down any second. She felt disgusted that there was a great rightness in the Tao. She had done something good from what she felt, but all she felt inside was dirty. She had murdered a man in cold blood.

She made it a little way into the wood when the sound of the car crash reached her. Chou dropped to her knees. She was crying, weeping. What had she done? What kind of monster was she?

All the pain and confusion, all the doubt and the fear, all the frustrations and fuck-ups all crashed in on her. Her cries of anguish were loud and could have been heard by any creature that moved through the trees. She fell from her knees onto her side, curling up into the fetal position. Right now she didn’t care if she died. After everything, look at what she had become.

She had killed an innocent man, someone who had done nothing yet. Killing him now, why? Why hadn’t she argued more, why had she just gone along with this? Why did she have to be trapped in a form that she hated? Why did her father have to be trapped by that fiend? When did her life have to suck so much?

She returned to her knees, her face red, with little trails of white where the tears had passed, bits of dirt clinging to her face. She looked up into the heavens and started screaming. There were no words; it was only the sound of her pain.

Finally, between her sobs her screams too voice. “Why?! Why the fuck did this have to happen!? Why?! Why?!!!”



She started pounding the earth below her, not even feeling the pain that those impacts had. Her chest fluttered with raw everything pouring out of her at once. She looked around for Destiny's Wave. A quick move of the sword and all of would be over. But her blade was no where in sight. She sobbed some more. "Why??!! WHY??! Why? Dear lord, why?"

This last bit had been whispered as Chou collapsed weakly onto the ground. She just shook and wept as all her hard work at blocking off her emotions failed. She was drowning in the tide of her own feelings and she didn't care anymore.

She lay there, lifeless, occasionally a sob or a cry of deep pain would wrest itself from her. Chou was dirty, worthless and evil. She knew that, for sure. She was heading a path of evil and just didn't want to fight against it. She was too drained to care. A lump of nothing.

Snow started to fall, softly, gently, drifting through the trees. Chou felt it melt on her cheek. She turned and looked up. The sight was beautiful. She lowered her head and cried. "Why? Why?"

She rolled onto her back, gazing up and the light flakes drifting with the wind. She had all but given up. There was no point anymore, no point in doing anything. All she had been asked to do was to kill. What was there she had to create, what did she have to preserve? Nothing. Death was all she owned.

"Please. Please, Lord, please help me? Help me to change from what I have become." Nothing happened. She could tell that the Tao had flowed from her and the cold was seeping in quickly. She shivered some, but was too emotionally drained that she only moved a little. She was tired and maybe she should just sleep. Maybe things would be better in the morning. Besides, she was starting to warm up.

As her eyelids began to drift close a soft light began to fill the glade. She did feel warm, and then a pins and needle sensation. She opened her eyes wide and stared in disbelief at the beautiful Asian woman who walked up to her. There was a feeling of complete serene peace surrounding the woman. She came up and hugged Chou, holding her tight.

Chou was stiff at first and then she relaxed into the hug. She cried a bit, but most of that had gone. The woman muttered soothing words and ran her hand through Chou's long, dark hair. Chou's crying slowed then stopped. She didn't feel as raw as she had earlier, just worn out. She looked and met the woman's luminous eyes.

"Greetings, Handmaid. You seem troubled. Perchance I can offer some assistance?" The voice was musical.

"I'm...I'm a monster." Chou looked away. Those eyes held too much compassion, too much love for her to meet them. She wasn't worthy.

"And what have you done to warrant such?"

"I...I killed an innocent man."

"You killed a man? From what I saw your actions saved a man and his family." replied the woman gently.

Chou looked up sharply at the woman. "How could you say that? I didn't save anyone."

"Handmaid..."

Chou interrupted the woman. "Please, just call me Chou."

"Very well Chou. I am Kwan Yin. Now, what do you know of this man?" She asked.

Chou pulled her legs under her, sitting up more on her own. "Andrew McWilliams was going to win the Lotto and then use that wealth to start a crime Syndicate. That group would end up killing several kids as well as some of my friends."

Kwan Yin shook her head softly, the sound of small bells filling the area. "That is not the man you dealt with. Andrew McWilliams worked in a factory. He was terminally ill but still working. It is true that he will win the Lotto, yet he will have lost the ticket. The day after the drawing his illness will have made him make a mistake at work and perish. His family will be devastated, especially since he has no life insurance. That family would have gone bankrupt. The mother would have worked herself nearly to death to keep her family but since she would be massively in debt and ill herself, her daughters will have become wards of the State. That would not end well for the girls."

"But I was told that the future was muddled, that nothing was clear, especially starting next fall? Was that a lie?" Chou felt that this woman would not be able to lie to her.

"No. All of this would have happened before then. Their world will have fallen apart. By killing him, what you did was to allow the family to get the Lotto ticket. That single thread of fate was easy to track, but it does connect and merge with others. This act is already woven into the fabric of life and the weave has changed. I am not sure of all ends, but this change keeps the thread strong. It was a kindness as Andrew was going to die, one way or another, but you helped him do so in a way that was not as painful nor as ruinous. You have saved a family."

Chou blinked in surprise. "I...I saved a family? He wasn't going to become bad?"



was beatific. "That is correct."

"But I am still a murderer. I killed that man."

"You are a force of nature and nature is not a murderer. Life and death must be balanced or the cycle is thrown out of balance. Think not on this flawed concept. You worked for the Balance and that is all that matters." Kwan Yin seemed to be looking into her very soul. It was unnerving.

Chou felt a bit better, yet there were other things weighing her down. Kwan Yin continued. "I can also sense that you have many other things tying you into knots. Your Chi is frayed and I am wondering if I may humbly assist you in any way?"

"Not unless you can turn me back into a guy." replied Chou bitterly.

"The Wheel turns Chou and no one can change that. You have become female due to ancient magics and the relic that can return you to your form is gone, held by your enemy. You fight and chafe against this form, which is clear, but why? There is no way, save one, to return to your old form. If you fight against your current form isn't that giving a weapon to your enemy? Are you not allowing your fears and doubts to rule you?" Kwan Yin released Chou just before the hug became too oppressive. She then shifted back into a seated position.

Chou blinked, confused for a second and then realization began to dawn on her. "Wait, you are saying that my hating myself since I am stuck as a girl is helping my enemies?"

"I am afraid that is correct. Your lack of compassion for yourself has not only been a weapon for your enemies but a weak spot that they can exploit. Did not the Demon Lord of Fiery Immersions use that self same means to throw you off balance?"

Chou nodded. "He did. So this girl thing is basically me beating up on myself and letting other people have a weapon?"

"That is what you are making of it. You should take this time to learn and absorb this other side. Your male self merged with your female self can give you balance rather than taking balance away. That possibility is one of the factors that have made you one of the potentially most powerful Handmaidens in a very long time. You can achieve a great deal of balance, if you managed to be compassionate with yourself." The beautiful woman reached out and brushed a loose strand of hair away from Chou's face. Some bells tinkled, filling the space with their light sound. "Besides, your body is not you. You are a being of limitless Mind and Spirit. The body is merely the vessel of these, and even that is a factor of both. Be who you are in truth, everything else will follow."

"But my father...how can I relax and chill out with my father held by that thing?" spat Chou, her emotions see-sawing wildly.

"Can you fight against the Demon Lord right now?" asked Kwan Yin.

Chou bowed her head, ashamed. "No, I can't."

"Then perhaps you should not worry about that but concentrate on becoming strong enough to fight him and win. You need to work on reframing that which is bothering you. You keep seeing things from one way only, yet by changing the way you see things you can be freed from all your woes. Your mind has become your prison, not the form you wear."

Chou looked up at her in disbelief. "Everything can be solved by changing the way I look at it? What the hell?"

"Chou, Lightfoot Kung Fu requires you to realize that you can step on the air as if it were a stone, or swim through it as if it were the sea. Is that not a rather revisioning of Air? Connecting to the Tao requires things like that. Why not utilize this technique to revision yourself?" asked Kwan Yin gently.

"I...uh...I...uhm...I don't know if I can." spluttered Chou.

"I believe in you. Those in Penglai Shan believe in you. Your Mentor, Miss Stone believes in you. Why can't you?"

"I...I don't know. And how can they believe in me? They lied to me about Mr. McWilliams." Her anger was fading so it didn't come out with as much force as she would have thought.

"Yes they did, but they had cause." replied Kwan Yin matter of factly.

"What cause?"

"You have not been raised in the Middle Kingdom or surrounding lands. You do not share the same world view at your core. This makes it more difficult for you to realize some of the facets of your duty. You have closed yourself off from some of the essential aspects of your role as Handmaid. Perhaps, they took the only way they could think of to get through to you? Or maybe they are afraid of what the Tao may do through you? You could always ask." Kwan Yin stood up and reached towards the sky, stretching.

Chou sat there a bit bedazzled. Her head was a whirl with everything that she had done and been told. Was the way she was

looking at things part of the problem? Was she making herself crazy? Was she afraid of looking at things in another way?

 Maybe I could do that. Am I making myself crazy?"

"You are adding to your own stress by failing to cherish yourself. Be compassionate with yourself, love yourself. The Handmaid doesn't do things out of Hate or Anger but rather out of Love. Enhance your Compassion and things will change. If you delve into your Compassion you will feel better and you will be able to interact with the world better. The Tao will flow through you easier and you will become the True Handmaid. Love yourself Chou and let others love you."

Chou could feel that she was enveloped in such love. She could tell that nothing else existed right now for Kwan Yin than that moment there with her. It was powerful and shook her. Kwan Yin heard her, really heard her, even the things she didn't say.

"But...I haven't been a very good friend lately and I treated Molly so badly. How can I fix that? How can they forgive me?"

The smile the Kwan Yin gave her warmed Chou in a way nothing else ever had. She felt like the darkness that she had let in burned away in the light of that smile. "Trust in your heart, Handmaid, and speak its truth. That will show you the way."

Friday, 1 December, 2006

Chou opened her eyes and she smiled. She was back in her bed and her heart felt less burdened. So much had been let go that she felt changed, like she had been reborn. Maybe things weren't that bad after all. Kwan Yin had sat with her as she let so much out. She had been so exhausted both physically and mentally that she had only made it home with the Bodhisattva's assistance. The woman had kissed her lovingly on her forehead, which made Chou remember how wonderful her mother had been. The kiss was a blessing and a protection, warding off all bad dreams.

She dropped down from the top bunk, flexing her knees to land silently, trying not to wake Ayla. She had slept well, nightmare free, with calming visions of Kwan Yin. Destiny's Wave was in her stand, looking no more worse for wear than before. Chou dressed quickly and went outside into the cold air. She breathed in deeply, feeling energized by the crisp air. It was good to be alive and she was still buoyed by the touch of Kwan Yin.

Nikki came out to a sight which almost made her fall over. Chou was laughing, spinning and flipping about. Chou seemed happy. Given how she had looked the day before, this was quite a surprise. Chou spotted her and sped over. She hugged the elf tightly. "Nikki, I am so sorry for being an idiot. Please forgive me."

Nikki nodded, too stunned to speak. Boudacia came out and yawned, "What happened yesterday? Sleep in?"

Chou laughed. "Sorry. Well, shall we begin?"

Chou hummed to herself as she showered. Maybe she had been making things worse for herself. There was no reason to do that. She had a lot of challenges ahead and being able to move past them gracefully was important. She had no intention of letting her thoughts dictate her life, and since Kwan Yin had pointed out how much they had been, she was going to take action to fix that. But first she wanted to fix things with her friends.

She laid in wait in the bathroom. One by one as they staggered in Chou stopped them, hugged them and said what she had said to Nikki. They all had a similar response. The other girls just stared at them, thinking it was another odd Team Kimba thing.

Chou then rushed to get dressed. She wanted to hurry and make things right. After grabbing Destiny's Wave she sprinted through the cold air to Dickinson Hall. She made her way past a number of the other residents in the dorm. Once inside she made her way to Molly's room. She was nervous as she knocked on the door.

Thankfully Molly answered the door. Chou smiled faintly. "Can I come in?"

Molly thought about it and let her in, pain evident on her face. Chou noticed that her roommate wasn't there, which made her happy. Molly sat on her bed, as the beds were separated and not as bunks. Chou crouched down so that they were looking eye to eye. "Molly, I am sorry. I am so sorry about the things I said. They were cruel and thoughtless. Can you please forgive me?"

Molly was sniffing. "You really hurt me Chou."

"I know and I am very sorry. I love you and want to be with you always. We can talk to your parents together, if you want. I'll hold your hand and be there for you. My head has been pretty messed up lately and I want to make things right with you."

"Do you promise to never do this again?" asked Molly worriedly.

Chou smiled softly. "I can't promise that. I have no idea when or if I'm gonna get stupid again and I don't want to break a promise to you."

Molly thought things over. "Okay. You're on probation. Don't go upsetting me, missy."

Chou stood and pulled Molly into a hug. It was tight and warm and comforting and both melted into it. They kissed and Chou pressed his lips into her ear, "I love you."

Molly hugged her and replied, "Good."

Breakfast was fine though the majority of Team Kimba were afraid that Chou had been replaced by an alien or some sort of psychotic clone. Toni merely joked that if she was a clone that they wouldn't be able to find the body. Chou flipped her off and everyone laughed. Things seemed better and Chou didn't feel so disconnected from everyone. After all, they had all gone through the change as well.

After breakfast when everyone was breaking up and heading off to classes Chou headed for Dr. Bellows' office. She knocked on the door, hoping he was in. She heard a slightly muffled "Come in."

He was busy eating a bagel slathered with cream cheese and looked surprised to see her. He gestured for her to sit with the bagel as he finished his bite. She sat and waited for him. Once he swallowed he took a big drink of his tea and looked at her.

Dr. Bellows could tell something was different. The girl didn't look so hang dog and seemed actually fairly peppy. He wasn't sure if it was uppers or that something had changed. "I see you are feeling better."

"Yes, I am. I would like to apologize for the way I acted. I have been really dumping on myself lately and I guess it got too much. Yesterday I went for a walk and thought about a lot of things. While I do know I feel good now, I am sure it will fade. Can you help me?"

Dr. Bellows was a bit surprised by the statement. "Alright. I think I can do that. So, why don't we talk about what made you so upset and go from there, okay?"

Chou nodded. "I think I can do that."

Chou felt the Tao urge her to move in a certain direction. She shrugged and let the Tao fill her and guide her. The movement seemed swift, as if she were carried by the wind itself. A gentle peace settled on her and she relaxed utterly, opening herself fully to the Tao.

She found herself standing in front of a house. It looked worn and had definitely seen better days. The siding looked old and pieces of it needed replacement. She moved inside, not really worrying about doors or walls. She stood in the kitchen where a woman and two girls were sitting. The woman looked like she had to do something difficult. Chou rested a hand on her shoulder to gentle her. The woman calmed, took a deep breath and began.

"Girls, Daddy isn't coming home. He...he had an accident last night."

The youngest one, who had to be Claire, looked up and blinked her blue eyes a few times, as she was trying to take in what was just said. "Daddy's gone? Gone how?"

The older girl, who had to be Christi, said, "Is dad dead?"

The mother just nodded. The girls began to cry. The mother shushed them. "It's not so bad. Your daddy wasn't afraid to die. He was more afraid of leaving us like this. He was a brave man and looked out for us, even if he was a little scatterbrained."

"He wasn't afraid to die?" asked Christi.

"Nope. He had come to terms with it. Your daddy had a rare form of cancer and was fighting to get us in a good financial place before he passed. You know how he misplaces things?"

The girls both nodded. Chou watched silently, unseen to their eyes.

"Well, your daddy lost the insurance papers, just like he did with the food stamps and the like. He never could keep things straight. But he did right by us. He took care of us even though he is in Heaven and looking down on us."

Claire came up to her mother's side and asked, "How did he do that?"

The mother pulled out an old, worn leather wallet. It had also seen better days as part of the crease was wearing away. She opened it and pulled out the Lotto card. "Your daddy bought this last night, before the accident. He put it in his wallet, instead of the floor. And you know what girls? This ticket won."

It was clear that the girls weren't sure if they were going to cry or cheer. The emotional ties between them were filled with grief and joy intermingled. She moved on as the Tao urged.

The family seemed to be a mixture of emotions which intrigued Chou. They had reached a state of balance, which was possibly different than what had been before. They would be all right, despite the loss of the father. She could feel that

current flow smoothly within the stream.



drew her, dark and pulsing with the green light of growth and life. The trees were alive and held their own lessons for her, of deep roots and patience. Chou drank it in as they moved on. Chou spotted a slight area of darkness and focused upon it.

The rabbit was busy nibbling some of the dried grass that carpeted the forest floor. It would pause and look around and then return to eating. A wave of energy preceded the fox as it pounced upon the rabbit. The darkness was snuffed out in an instant. The green returned.

Chou flowed back to where she had been, back to Whateley with more questions. But she was starting to understand. Death was merely a part of life and not a bad thing. The clarity of the realization brought her back to Whateley and on the path to her Mentor. She was confused to find that she hadn't gone more than ten feet from where she had started this trip. How the...? What the hell was going on?

As she looked around the area, her thoughts turned to more important things, like what she had become aware of. She now realized that death was necessary for life. Killing was not always bad. A senseless, purposeless death was bad but not simple death. She could have warned the rabbit, saved it from the fox, but the fox had a right to live as well. Andrew McWilliams' death served a purpose, of releasing a man from pain and assisting a family to have something to save them and remember the man forever. That had been a good death.

Her brow furrowed as she realized that she was becoming that force of nature that Kwan Yin mentioned. She was becoming Death, but more than that, she was becoming the hand of nature and nature was not always welcomed nor always kind. She was the hand of the Tao, the hand of Gaia herself, keeping the river flowing, adjusting the balance in any way it needed from death of an Immortal to saving the life of an ant. She was the Handmaid of the Tao and was the balance between all things.

This realization settled within her and she smiled a faint smile of understanding. She had done what she had to have done, for good or for ill. Andrew McWilliams would never be forgotten. She sighed and looked back towards her destination. There were still things left to do.



"You lied to me." Chou's voice was stern in its accusation. It was clear that she was upset.

Becca didn't flinch or bat an eye. "That I did. This task was something you should have felt but didn't as you have been keeping yourself blind to the currents. You would not have done this if we had not spun the tale. You could kill a villain but not a man in need. You need to be able to do this."

Chou sighed and looked up at the ceiling of their training room. "I know, I know. Destiny's Wave told me, you told me and even I can see the reasoning behind it. I get it already. That still doesn't deal with the fact that you lied to me and misled me. How will I know if you do it again? How can I trust you for the truth?"

Becca actually smiled at this. "Chou, the Tao flows through you in a way that even Master Lao Tzu cannot achieve. You can become one with the Tao, to become its focus. The Tao can tell you. The Tao is your true teacher. I can only show you techniques to make your work easier, but I am not your true teacher."

Chou stared at her, her anger deflating. Maybe what she said was the Truth. Maybe Chou needed to only trust the Tao. It was definitely something to think about. "Fine. But if you lie to me again there will be consequences. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to go see Chief Delarose."

Chou turned and walked away from Becca, not caring about anything else she might say at the moment. Since she had skipped school she knew she would be in trouble, and was surprised that Security hadn't picked her up yet. She entered the Security office and waited to be noticed.

It took a few minutes but she was noticed. "Can I help you?"

"Yes. Can I please speak with Chief Delarose? My name is Chou Lee." She smiled at him.

He nodded and hit an intercom button. "Chief, I have a Miss Chou Lee to see you."

"Send her in." The voice didn't sound happy and Chou was sure there would certainly be words.

Chou walked in, meekly taking a seat under the glare of Chief Delarose. He started immediately. "Was there some sort of reason that you decided to skip school and go for a walk yesterday?"

Chou nodded. "I had a lot to think about and I think better outside, when I'm moving. I learned that hiking up here. I know that it was wrong, but I needed to try and get my head straight."

"You certainly need that. And did you get your head on straight?"

"Well, it's straighter. Dr. Bellows is going to help me and I am going to try and keep from bottling everything up. I am sorry for the trouble I caused." Chou sincerely apologized.

Chief Delarose looked thoughtfully at the girl. He knew troubled kids and he could tell that something had changed with in the girl. This was not the same girl who had beaten Sharisha. Maybe she did get her head straight? "Apology accepted. I am afraid you are going to get detention for skipping school, but it is only detention, not cleaning at Hawthorne."

"If the punishment is cleaning at Hawthorne, then I will do that. I did break the rules." Chou returned, feeling that it was necessary to add that.

Chief Delarose nodded. "Alright. Two days detention at Hawthorne starting next Monday. I think just maybe that you got your head on straight. We'll see and I will still be watching you. We have an Ultraviolet badge made up for you and waiting."

Chou nodded. "Thank you Chief Delarose. May I be excused?"

He nodded, trying to connect this girl with the girl he had met right after the assault. Things weren't meshing right. He would certainly watch her until he knew which girl was the real Chou Lee.

Chou headed off to the pool. The day was mostly shot, with her talking to everyone she needed to. She needed to relax and burn off some steam. Thinking that she would want water for that, she headed to the pool and got her suit out of the locker. Several laps later, she sighed and floated in the diving area. The water soothed her and caressed her, her stress flowing out of her.

Chou thought about what Kwan Yin had said, about everything. She had made herself Chou, by her own words and actions. Alex hadn't died, he had simply become Chou. She was both at the same time. There really was only her. She was who her thoughts had made, and now she wanted to stop freaking out and get on with living and training. She would get back her manhood, but first she had to get ready for that fight.

And Molly, she could feel Molly, feel that her girlfriend was feeling better. Their connection was strong and pulsing. Things there were looking better. She had her love and wanted to learn how to treat her right. She wasn't Alex any more and so maybe she needed to learn a different way of interacting with Molly. Maybe.

She also thought about Dorjee. She had agreed to go out on a date with him. Maybe she should see where that led. It might provide some cover for her and Molly, to keep their relationship hidden. And he might be an in to the Dragons.

Chou realized that her whole body was pruning. She swam to the edge of the pool and got out of the water. Some of the other kids in there, doing laps or just relaxing in the water were looking at her. The guys especially were checking her out, as the swimsuit clung tightly to her firm, athletic body. Chou merely smiled as she walked to the locker room. Maybe those looks weren't so bad after all?

"Please Mrs. Horton. Please. I promised everyone that I was going to buy them dinner. Can I please call for delivery?"

Mrs. Horton looked down at Chou. This girl was generally quiet and she did understand that she was goaded into that fight, so maybe she should let the girl try to repay her friends. Besides, the girl before her seemed nothing like the strung out girl who had collapsed on the floor the other afternoon. Maybe it would be allowable, to let the girl do something for her friends.

"Alright." The hug Chou gave her surprised Mrs. Horton. Chou dashed upstairs to let the others know of the new dinner plans. Once that was accomplished, Chou bounded back down the stairs to place the order. Wok and Roll had some decent food overall and she dialed the phone quickly. No one in the lobby was able to follow the order as it was all in Chinese. Chou smiled, as she had gotten loads of food and a discount.

The Kimba Korner was filled with laughter as the girls ate their Mai Fun and Shrimp in Garlic Sauce. Toni was trying to keep the General Tso's Chicken away from Tenny, which was tricky as the other girl came from different angles, including from above. There was a wide spread of food, many types generally served only to the owners family. It was a nice relaxing evening filled with chatter and laughter.

"So, what happened? You are way different than you were Wednesday." asked Hank.

"Well, yesterday I went out on walkabout and after I broke down and cried, Kwan Yin showed up and talked with me." replied Chou, hiding her murder. The other girls might not understand and that was okay.

A few of them goggled at this. Toni quipped back, "What's up with you and these Chinese Gods?"

Chou shrugged, and then stole a piece of General Tso's before Toni could respond. "Hell if I know. But it certainly helped yesterday. Mostly she helped me re-frame everything. I was seeing everything in my life one way, that was making me miserable and she showed me a new way to think about things."

Ayla looked over at her with distaste evident. Everyone knew how Ayla felt about anything that seriously smacked of religion.

 "One of those screwy metaphysical things that you and Toni blather on about?"

Both Toni and Chou nodded, chuckling. Ayla rolled her eyes and went back to her Mu Shu. Toni smiled broadly at Chou. "I like this new you. It is certainly going to make Christmas much more fun. You were as broody as Angel from Buffy. It didn't really suit you."

Chou threw a crab Rangoon at her, which was plucked from the air and eaten by Nikki. Others laughed at this as Jade looked over at Chou and asked, "So is it true? You have a date with Chain Lightning?"

Chou blushed brightly as Toni remarked, "Chain Lightning. You mean the hot Tibetan Sophomore? Wow. From what I heard he hasn't had a single date since he has been here. Supposedly he is trying to decide if he wants to become a Monk or not. Very nice. I know a number of girls who are going to be pissed at you."

"Well, hopefully we'll just become friends as Molly and I are really serious."

Ayla snorted. "You guys are practically joined at the hip, so I guess that is clearly serious."

Chou's blush got brighter and her face burned. She was looking at her Hot and Sour soup as she answered. "Well, so it goes. Maybe it will be fun and we'll become friends?"

"What the hell really happened to you Chou? To change so much so fast. How did you manage that?" Tennyo really was interested, as this change seemed as dramatic as her own transformation.

Chou replied with a soft smile. "What can I say...the Tao provides. The Wheel turns and life goes on. My Wheel has turned and my life is continuing on. So it goes."

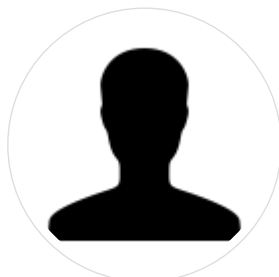
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Team Kimba (46)
Whaoblange (35)

Breadcrumbs

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